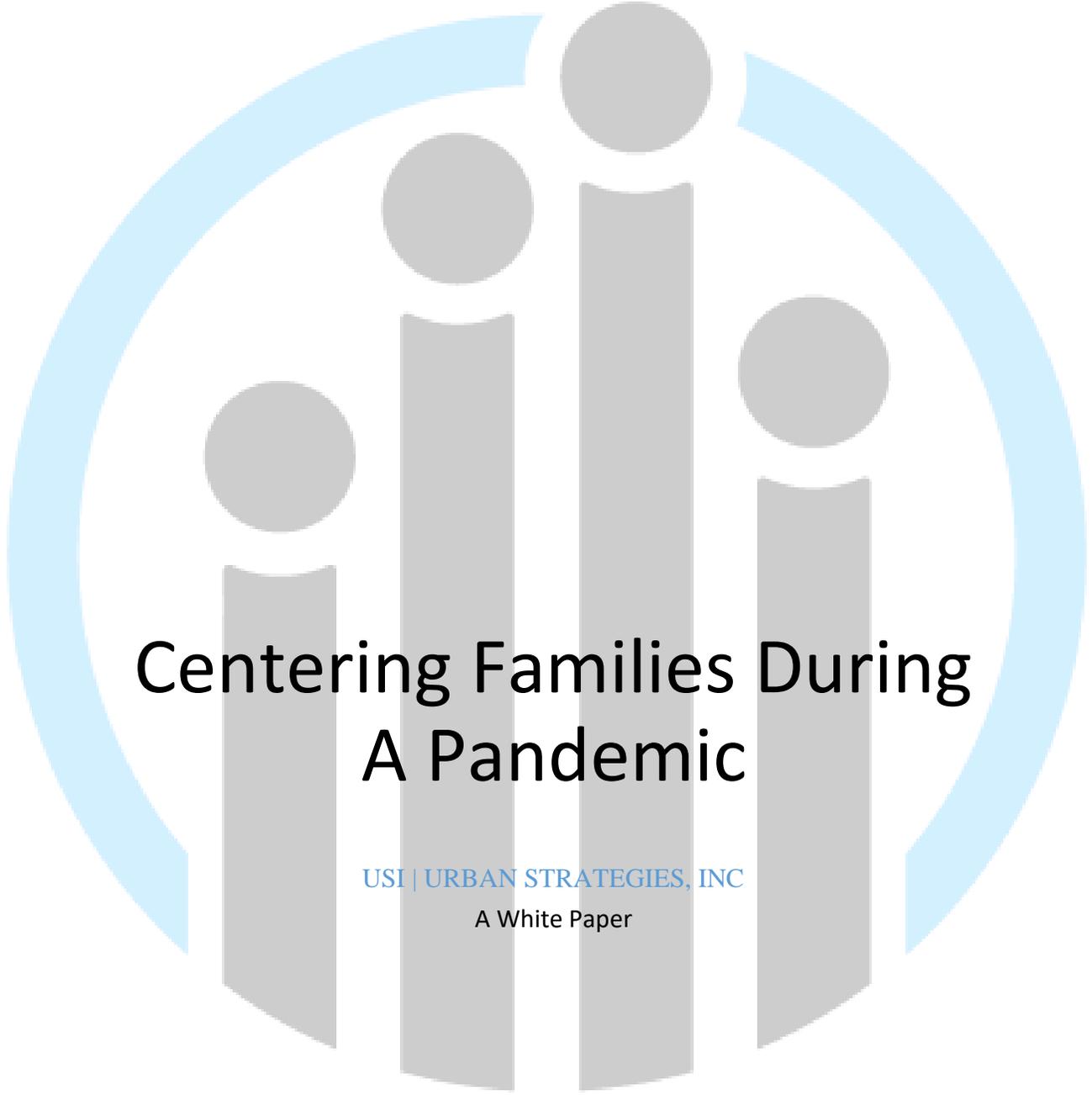


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A stylized graphic of a family consisting of four grey vertical bars of varying heights representing people, each topped with a grey circle representing a head. The entire family icon is enclosed within a light blue circular arc that is broken at the top and bottom. The title text is centered over the family icon.

Centering Families During A Pandemic

USI | URBAN STRATEGIES, INC

A White Paper

Centering Families During A Pandemic

In the wake of a global health pandemic, the impact of a similarly devastating and pervasive condition persists – racism. While the novel COVID-19, Coronavirus, disease has unfortunately taken the lives of over 150,000 humans and impacted nearly 2.5 million families globally, to say that it has done so indiscriminately would be false. In the United States, the release of more accurate predictions of the impact of the virus has resulted in unprecedented nationwide extensions of rigorous social distancing “Slow the Spread” guidelines. While the predictions didn’t quite tell us who would be hit the hardest, once again, the data has provided another stark reminder that African Americans especially will continue to be gravely impacted because of racism – an undeniable social determinant of health in its own right.

To combat COVID-19, most governments have acted with states issuing Stay-at-Home orders and cities instituting fines for violations of curfews and social-distancing requirements. Yet, none of the actions have addressed the structural racism that has contributed to the lack of coordination, focus, and awareness to the unique challenges people of color face in this country. That oversight is precisely why, time and again, low-income African American families in particular have topped the charts of those impacted by COVID-19 in cities across the nation.

Today, all schools and universities have transitioned to distance learning models, many businesses have adjusted their operations or closed, and countless Americans have been laid off. The response of a federal stimulus package to millions of American households is helpful, but it simply is not enough. In fact, so long as the strategies are approached with a one-size-fit-all model, they will never be enough for our families who have been disinvested and under-resourced by the *pandemic* of racism far longer than COVID-19.

Soon after the introduction of the “Slow the Spread” CDC guidance, USI launched our COVID-19 Action Plan to track COVID-19 impact across our communities in an effort to: develop aligned national strategies, coordinate responses, and track COVID-19 progress as it relates to both our families and our staff. We developed a family assessment geared towards assessing the needs and risks of our families to help connect them with available resources and to advocate for more. USI’s starting point for developing strategy is the disaggregated data that allows us to highlight the trends and needs across subgroups in our population and address them with intentionality. In recognizing that racism is a significant barrier to the well-

being of our families we can only adequately serve them by starting with data about race. Over 90% of the population we serve is African American and economically disadvantaged.

Our assessment data has showed us that:

- 30% of our families lack resources such as food, disinfectant products, and household toiletries;
- 52% of our families have one or more family members that suffer from a chronic health condition;
- 22% of our families don't have access to internet and Wi-Fi that would allow their children to effectively participate in distance learning; and
- 50% of our families have lost employment or wages due to COVID-19.

The obstacles our families face, in many cases, are often compounded by the everyday realities they must endure as they navigate the disinvested communities where they live. These communities are often under-resourced with inadequate access to basic needs such as quality healthcare and healthy foods. Again, this environment is the result of deeply rooted institutionalized racism, which is effectively an "underlying health condition" for the families we serve.

Although racial demographic data related to COVID-19 is still limited, given our reality, it isn't a surprise that COVID-19 has hit low-income families of color the hardest in terms of health, education, and economic measures. For the few cities that have released racial data, African Americans are accounting for a disproportionate number of deaths related to the virus, despite the fact that they are often a significantly smaller segment of the total population. The pandemic is highlighting the underlying economic and racial disparity across the country where many African American communities still face barriers to healthcare access. Currently, over 70% of New Orleans' COVID-19 related deaths are African American, despite the fact that they make up only 33% of the state's population.

Data from completed assessments show that our families in New Orleans are being most severely affected by COVID-19. USI's New Orleans's staff have faced greater challenges in supporting residents whose needs have drastically increased over the last few weeks, even as resources remain scarce. Staff has been engaged in helping the newly unemployed households obtain unemployment benefits and providing technological assistance to help

families with the transition to virtual, especially for the nearly 90% who have children with distance learning requirements.

Even as restrictions and regulations tighten, many of the working adults in our families are amongst the millions of underpaid essential workers in the nation without the luxuries of work-from-home relief. Approximately half of the assessed families have been laid off as a result of COVID-19, and while less than 10% of families said they would have difficulty paying their April rent, that number is expected to increase as the pandemic extends into the upcoming months. So, while half our families are the working poor, now dubbed “essential workers,” the other half are unemployed and at an even greater risk of housing instability, even amidst a national eviction moratorium.

USI leadership and partners from across the nation have come together to help address the needs of our families. USI staff have compiled both local and national resources to distribute to residents and made new connections with local organizations to identify opportunities to collaborate. Site leadership has connected with local businesses including restaurants and hotels to identify opportunities to donate resources that may go unused during city-wide business closures. USI’s dedicated family support staff have taken on the role of transporting supplies directly to families who do not have adequate transportation options or are high-risk populations, such as our seniors. Our education specialists have created educational content to keep school-aged children engaged while school districts work to prepare distance-learning curriculum. USI’s latest development is the Recession Workforce Planning committee created specifically to strategize around economic mobility and stability for our families, in the face of the looming unemployment crisis, which has already reached over 22 million claims in the span of a few weeks.

There is still a long way to go, but thus far, USI has helped over 3500 families receive assistance with accessing food supplies, rental and utility payments, government benefits, medical goods and services, and basic needs such as disinfectants and household toiletries. Many of our site leaders are working hard in cities where new cases show no sign of slowing down, from the South’s epicenter in New Orleans to St. Louis, Sacramento, Puerto Rico, St. Croix, Pittsburgh and Baltimore, to name a few. USI staff are working to help close the resource gap for families wherever possible. Hundreds of households are being provided weekly food supply, financial donations are being used towards buying household essentials

and resources and support has been extended to all who need assistance, despite the added capacity required to fulfill those needs.

Our Action Plan fills gaps where needed and ensures reasonable measures are being taken to provide staff with their own protection as essential operations continue. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to develop, USI is proactively strategizing to ensure our families can remain on the pathway to stable and thriving. USI recognizes that the current system has failed our most vulnerable and that is why our advocacy agenda is directed towards:

- Increasing the minimum wage to a living wage that is able to support the basic needs of families. This pandemic has revealed the inequities regarding pay when considering the definition of an essential employee;
- Improving the healthcare system so that it is both accessible and culturally competent; and
- Developing the infrastructure that's needed to provide all families with internet and technology-related opportunities.

USI will continue to work in solidarity with the families we support, by continuing to disaggregate data and build robust strategies with our local partners that ensure families are stable and moving towards thriving. We will use our voice to lift the countless disparities that our families and neighbors face daily to ensure that freedom rings equitably in disenfranchised communities across the country, and we hope you do, too.